

7 You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. **8** Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. **9** But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. **10** I hear many whispering, "Terror on every side! Denounce him! Let's denounce him!" All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, "Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him." **11** But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten. **12** Lord Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause. **13** Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.

Belly Full of Fire

There is a saying that's been around for while. I don't if the origins are found in a potbelly stove or train but that saying is, "There is fire in his belly," or "His belly is full of fire." That saying expresses the drive, the vigor, passion, and a desire to carry through no matter what. This saying speaks of an uncontrollable fire that cannot be contained. There is another expression which means the exact opposite. I know the origins because I made it up. Standing opposite of a belly full of fire is a belly full of food. Which means, "I'm done eating. I'm content. It's time to lay down and take a nap." That drive, vigor, and passion are done. There is no desire to eat.

Jeremiah knows what it's like to have a belly full of fire. He also knows what it's like to have a belly full of food. When he tries to put a cork in it he confesses, "*God's Word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.*" It's a fire that rages. It's a fire that consumes and Jeremiah is caught in the middle. Jeremiah is exhausted. His drive is gone. He's not even hungry anymore. He wishes he were never born.

That happens in life. We lose our drive. That belly full of fire is exchanged for a belly full of food and often unwilling. I no longer have the same drive to push myself as much as I once did (probably a good thing so I don't pass out while running). In many

ways we may find ourselves burnt out, ready to give up, wishing we were never born. But God wants us to understand that he cares for his prophet and he cares for us, even when that belly full of fire burns out. God's still there with Jeremiah and he's still here with us. He is a mighty warrior with a belly full of fire.

That's easy to forget. Especially if you're in a situation struggling like Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a faithful priest among a corrupt and self-serving people. A prophet during the most troubling times of biblical history. He lived through the good, bad, and ugly kings who were only interested in feeding their bellies. He saw the invasion of Judah by the Babylonians, the siege and sacking of Jerusalem. He saw the starvation and destruction of his nation. Jeremiah must have had an iron stomach because he warned them repeatedly, yet they would not listen. That fire is almost snuffed out by his own tears. Throughout this book we find laments which reveal Jeremiah's struggle. Throughout these laments it becomes apparent that Jeremiah didn't want this job in the first place. He claims, *"Lord, You deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed."* He accuses God of lying to him, of being a deceptive stream in the desert. Maybe he expected the work to be easier. Maybe he's recalling all of the promises of God, *"They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.* And wondering, "Well, where are you?" Jeremiah suffers when he speaks the Word of God and he suffers when he tries to keep quiet. The Word of God burns within him.

He suffers when he speaks because his word is a message of destruction that strikes at the authorities in Israel. *"I am putting my words as a fire in your mouth; these people are tinder and it will consume them."* (Jeremiah 5:14) As Jeremiah faithfully proclaims the word of God Pashur the priest and chief officer in the house of the Lord heard him, beat him and put him in the stocks by the upper gate. Jeremiah is roasted by those around him. Ridiculed, rebuked, and censured. His close friends start a whispering campaign, waiting and watching for him to slip up. They sarcastically repeat his message, *"Terror on every side."* Jeremiah is ready to give up. He is burned the people. He feels burned by God. That belly full of fire is burnt out.

We too live in troubling times. Politicians attack Christian beliefs and many believe that the idea of being imprisoned or put to death may come within this generation or the next. As we look around at world events we find sickening and horrifying things happening to Christians everywhere. Nobody seems to listen or care. And we too may

worry about the future and start thinking that trusting in God is foolish. That fire struggles.

We may try to keep quiet. Do what Jeremiah did: say nothing. Don't mention God to others. Steer the conversation away from religion whenever possible. Don't sweat the small stuff and all those "doctrinal" issues. Practice religious pluralism and become more ecumenical. Set aside our differences as if they aren't that great and just go along and get along. But that's not what Jeremiah did. He stood faithful to the word of God and was burned for it. There was no other option even when exhausted.

If we keep this fire of God's Word in and to ourselves the Word burns us. Jesus speaks, "*Whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 10:33). Jeremiah speaks of it as a fire in his heart, a fire shut up in his bones. We *are* burned by the Word of God in that it condemns us if we keep quiet. We are caught in the middle between the burning in our bones or the fire it produces among those around us. That may make you ready to give up burned by the world, burned by God, burnt out and settling for a belly full of food without any desire to eat. So how does Jeremiah restart his drive? Does he get pumped up, smash his head against a locker? Grunt loudly? God finds him. Jeremiah 15:16 - Jeremiah writes, "*When your words came I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight.*" Jeremiah recalls the Word of God and remembers who God is. God is a mighty warrior. One who is not to be messed with.

Jeremiah continues, "*so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten.*" This warrior God is almighty and *examines the righteous and probes the heart and mind*. Smashes opposition and destroys sin. He is a just God who calls his rebellious people to return by sending his suffering servant - that weeping prophet Jeremiah.

But as much as Jeremiah suffered it was nothing in comparison to the suffering that would be released upon his Son Jesus. Jeremiah realizes that God is not a deceiver but he is a deliverer. God is not tolerant of sin. The suffering and death of his son prove that God will not tolerate sin and rebellion. But God is not also unmerciful. The suffering and death of his son as our substitute prove that. God sent his son. The son willingly stood in our place taking care of every full belly. Jeremiah spoke of this as well as a new covenant that God would establish by his own strength and power. That covenant came and was sealed with the life of Jesus. His perfect life, death, and resurrection.

That is the mighty God that, *"is with us."* When Jeremiah looks at the world and worries about what the future might hold he fails to trust in God. But God is with him during the accusations and the weary moments. God is with his prophet when he is beaten and put in the stocks. He is even with his prophet when he curses the day he was born.

God is with us. No, he has never promised us a bed of roses. But he has promised us that no matter what happens, no matter what we suffer in life or death he is there. We might cry out to God, "You got me into this mess," you can trust that he will get us out. We too can hold onto the promise of God that he is with us. That's the ancient Christian greeting we use in worship. Before the prayer of the day or even before Lord's Supper we greet each other, "The Lord be with you," and the response is, "and also with you." It reminds us of Jesus' last words, *"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20). That's the promise that we don't go alone.

Jesus knows exactly what we are going through because he's been here. He suffered for the sins of his prophet Jeremiah and he suffered for our sins as well. He rekindles in us the fire of his love. Fills our bellies with his body and his blood so that strengthened and nourished by his word so we can fill others. Sometimes we just need to eat.

Whatever fire rage around you, religious persecution or rejection. Don't be afraid. God reminds us that his Word is powerful and his Word works. It will accomplish his desire and achieve the purpose for which it was sent. Jeremiah didn't see a single soul heed his warning but God's Word had its effect. Jeremiah's words which are recorded for us still have their effect. Speak faithfully. You may set the world on fire. You may be hated by all. Stay hungry. The Lord is a dread warrior a mighty God. Use that authority and the power given to you. Point out the love of God for all people. God's passion, his belly is full of fire for those burnt out be it his prophets or those whose bellies are full of food.

I can't say you will have the same drive or passion that you once did (probably a good thing). That belly full of fire may still look like a belly full of food but every day be reminded of our God who didn't give up on a lamenting prophet, he hasn't given up on us either. Instead stay hungry, full of passion, vigor, and drive as you realize salvation never has been about you but about our dread warrior, our mighty God whose belly was full of fire for you. Amen.